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AUTHOR Sledd, James
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, James Sledd and his son Andrew Sledd respond, on seven distinct points, to Sandra Stotsky's "Connecting Civic Education and Language Education" and to her "College English" essay "Conceptualizing Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking," in both of which she attacks the Sledds for their criticism of E. D. Hirsch. According to the paper, Stotsky's technique is to lift short passages of academic prose from their explanatory contexts and then to praise or blame them according to her notions of scholarly responsibility. The paper notes that one of the qualities that Stotsky values highly is academic courtesy. The paper also states that, in both book and essay, Stotsky has called the Sledds' criticism of E. D. Hirsch irresponsible, racist, age-ist and immoral--and rude, too. In response, the Sledds affirm that, although they dislike being called racist, they are not primarily concerned with the personal attacks. In the paper they make three familiar but sometimes neglected propositions: (1) that the politic evasion of an opponent's evidence and arguments, though commonplace, is not an academic virtue; (2) that such criticism of "decontextualized" passages as Stotsky recommends is guaranteed to obscure issues really at stake; and (3) that the ancient rhetorical tradition of justified blame as well as praise should not be submerged in a rhetoric of identification for immediate persuasion. (TB)

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James Sledd

Sandra Stotsky's Civic Education: What Gets Taught

ED 377 514

This paper, you will grieve to hear, has seven parts, the first of them unavoidably personal but moving to quite impersonal assertions.

1. Pre-ramble: The Occasion and Our Purpose

When E. D. Hirsch published The Philosophy of Composition, I criticized the book in papers at the University of Texas and the University of Alabama. As one objection, I said that Hirsch had distorted some of his sources among the linguists. When Hirsch abandoned composition's one philosophy and published Cultural Literacy, my son Andrew Sledd and I. in a documented essay for the MLA's annual publication Profession, repeated the charge of distortion. According to Phyllis Franklin, the MLA's executive director, Hirsch threatened to sue if our essay was printed. After it appeared, he ignored our precise and detailed evidence and simply proclaimed that not a single distortion had been proved. In the journal Written Communication, Andrew and I then offered a much longer critical analysis of Hirschian literacy, supporting careful arguments with detailed evidence from Hirsch's work. His Dictionary of Cultural Literacy appeared after we had written our essay, to which we consequently added a postscript, again with arguments massively supported by facts from the book. Midway through that postscript on the work of "three Virginia academics," we drew the conclusion that "the mindset of a comfortable white gerontocracy can be traced throughout the Dictionary." "Colonel Blimp," we said in a sentence filled with echoes of our own cultural experience, "has not achieved Nirvana but has suffered a cisatlantic reincarnation." Harvard's Dr. Sandra Stotsky, editor of Research in the

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Teaching of English, then followed Hirsch's example of ignoring our evidence but nevertheless berated us vigorously in a book and in a College English essay. "Hirsch's work," she wrote, "has generated so much irresponsible academic writing that an open-minded reader might be tempted to conclude that his ideas are so sound that they cannot be responsibly criticized at all." Having planted that suggestion beyond withdrawal, Dr. Stotsky immediately withdrew it and went on to praise a criticism of Hirsch by John Warnock, a criticism that she somewhat misread.

Andrew Sledd and I now respond both to Dr. Stotsky's book, Connecting Civic Education and Language Education, and to her College English essay (November 1992), "Conceptualizing Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking." The essay is largely reprinted, without the conventionally expected acknowledgment, from the book's fifth chapter, less generally entitled "Teaching Academic Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking" (emphasis added). Dr. Stotsky's technique is to lift short passages of academic prose from their explanatory contexts and then to praise or blame them according to her notions of scholarly responsibility.

Among the qualities which Dr. Stotsky values highly is academic courtesy. Accordingly, in both book and essay, she has called our criticism of E. D. Hirsch irresponsible, racist, age-ist, and immoral--and rude, too. For our part, my son and I do not believe that Dr. Stotsky is age-ist or immoral, though we are troubled by her apparent attitude toward the Arab world. On the contrary, we believe that she is well-intentioned and altogether sincere in her unalterable convictions but that she is deeply mistaken in her politics and on occasion (because of her politics) an incompetent reader and teacher of writing. Her inculcation of "civic virtue," we fear, is in fact inoculation against dissent.

Andrew and I, though we dislike being called racist, are not primarily concerned, however, with personal controversy. Instead, we wish mainly to argue three familiar but sometimes

neglected propositions: first, that the politic evasion of an opponent's evidence and arguments, though commonplace, is not an academic virtue; second, that such criticism of "decontextualized" passages as Dr. Stotsky recommends is guaranteed to obscure issues really at stake; and third, that the ancient rhetorical tradition of justified blame as well as praise should not be submerged in a rhetoric of identification for immediate persuasion. Rhetorical situations vary as audiences do. One does not wish identification with every audience, and in some situations denunciatory rhetoric is not just tolerable but fully justified. It is often simply wrong to offer compromise in the hope of an immediate consensus.

2. Dr. Stotsky's Politics

In the politics which partially determines her reading and writing, Dr. Stotsky is a celebrator nationalist, holding that, for all its faults, the United States is essentially deserving of esteem. Our republican government, defined by the traditional great documents, is heavily dependent on the voluntary participation of devoted citizens, but the necessary devotion to the common good is threatened by fragmentation into contentious groups. Allegiance to such groups must not be allowed to weaken the overriding allegiance to the republic.

Not all members of a given group do or should think and act alike. To suggest that they do is stereotyping. The ideal citizen is a self-defined, autonomous individual, freely choosing the groups to which he or she belongs, and blessed with civic self-esteem through allegiance to the virtuous republic.

Civic self-esteem can be weakened (Dr. Stotsky continues), and the republic further divided, by unwise scholars, social critics, and creative writers when they attempt to apply European ideas which are irrelevant to the American experience because they are European. Recognizing that there are no rights without responsibilities, citizens should avoid social

negativism and polarized thinking.

The responsibility of educators is particularly heavy. Teachers of English can bear their part of the burden and can cultivate civic virtue by teaching the supposed particular virtues of academic writing and by reprehending the opposing vices. Hence Dr. Stotsky's rules for writers--some of them, unfortunately, impossible to consistently observe ("gather all relevant information on a topic"), others self-contradictory ("avoid making blanket generalizations about any [sic] phenomenon, as there are always [sic] exceptions to even strong regularities"), others commonly counterfactual ("assume an open-minded reader"), others banalities though excellent banalities ("present facts accurately"). Plainly, James and Andrew Sledd are notable violators of some among the Stotsky-ite rules. In the words of Richard A. Katula in the seventh chapter of Dr. Stotsky's book, the Sledds "do not know how to argue," whether or not their offending criticisms of E. D. Hirsch are correct. As Dr. Stotsky sees us, we are indeed rude, negative, divisive, guilty of "age-ist and racist stereotyping."

3. Contextualizing the Decontextualized: The Sledds' Politics

A bit later, we will look at the passage which has so provoked our critics, perhaps to the point that they violate Dr. Stotsky's rules of "respect for other writers"; but first we must emphasize that Dr. Stotsky's analysis of the decontextualized passages which she praises or blames is comprehensible only if it is contextualized, seen in the light of her conservative politics. Our attack on Hirsch must be similarly contextualized by writers (or readers) who follow Dr. Stotsky's rule "to present another writer's views fairly."

Unlike Dr. Stotsky, we are not happy with nationalism in a global village dominated by transnational corporations, and we cannot accept notions of the common good that are circumscribed by national boundaries. Humanity is above all nations. We do not agree that

among the nations, the United States is somehow exceptionally virtuous.

In a deeply divided society, moreover, under a government which is neither by nor for the people, attack and resistance by contending groups are inevitable and sometimes laudable. Rejecting the myth of the self-defined, autonomous individual, we believe that involuntary groups are real and that their submergence in an overriding allegiance to the nation would perpetuate present injustice. It is the extreme of misguided nationalism to maintain that European social thought is irrelevant to the United States (or that American social thought is irrelevant to Europe), and it is subcultural imperialism to suggest that the virtues of academic writing as Dr. Stotsky alleges them can be a special guide to civic virtue.

Briefly, we differ almost point by point with Dr. Stotsky's political views as we have conscientiously tried to summarize them, and in consequence we think quite differently of some of the passages that she blames or praises. Decontextualizing the passages leads to superficial and misleading interpretation. The real differences between Dr. Stotsky and the Sledds lie much deeper than their opposing judgments of E. D. Hirsch and his version of cultural literacy.

4. Denunciatory Rhetoric

To illuminate at least one of those deep political and rhetorical issues, we turn again to the denunciatory rhetoric which sometimes we quite deliberately employ. In that practice, we place ourselves in an ancient tradition, with both Hellenic and Hebraic roots. Less remote exemplars include reformers and martyrs both Protestant and Catholic, the dissenting ministers who have played a large part in the attempted cultivation of American virtue (civic and otherwise), and a great crowd of writers, easily exemplified by Samuel Johnson (who called America "a nation of savages") and Thomas Jefferson (who notably insulted George III in the Declaration of Independence).

Denunciatory rhetoric has often been a rhetoric of witness-bearing, of dissent in desperate causes. It is often emotional, sometimes lacking Arnoldian sweetness and light because it is embattled. Always fallible, the denunciatory rhetorician nonetheless finds common ground with at least some audiences by insistence on reasoned argument from solid evidence to what the dissenter sees as vital truth.

In striving for rationality, the dissenting rhetorician acknowledges the strength of ethical argument (argument from the character of the arguer); but that acknowledgment implies the recognition of utility in the negative version of ethical argument, the argument ad hominem. The facts of cases determine whether the ad hominem is justified. For example, it rightly lengthens the sentences of inveterately violent criminals, but denunciatory rhetoric gives way to scurrility when reasoned argument from solid evidence is replaced by mere abuse. To make false charges of racism is scurrilous.

Denunciatory rhetoric may sometimes be labeled "preaching to the choir," but if one of its purposes is to encourage resistance against the dominant, another is to compel attention from all audiences. Often it is not a rhetoric of immediate persuasion but of the hope for eventual persuasion, a hope embodied in the belief that the human animal is sometimes--though only sometimes--capax rationis. In other words, denunciatory rhetoric acknowledges the existence of contending groups of sometimes involuntary members but also acknowledges that although real groups really think differently, group membership is not totally determinative.

5. In Self-defense

We have taken so long to contextualize Dr. Stotsky's criticism of one fragment of our criticism of E. D. Hirsch that we have no time to read the passages in question. The handout includes pages 159 and 160 of Dr. Stotsky's book (page 804 in the College English version) and

all six pages of our postscript to our longer article. We hope that when you leave you will ponder the handout as we have contextualized it. The wicked paragraphs are on our page 386.

In your pondering, perhaps you will recall that the Sledds do not believe in the autonomous, self-defining individual, belonging only to groups of the individual's own choosing. James Sledd did not choose to be an elderly, white, male, middle-class, Southern Anglo sired by a Virginia academic (M. A. Harvard, Ph. D. Yale) who was also a Methodist person; but he knows that in many ways he thinks and acts like other ancients of his vanishing, disparaged breed and unlike young people, African Americans or Hispanics, women, the wealthy, the illiterate--or Yankees. Neither Sledd is age-ist when he recalls that "crabbed age and youth cannot live together," or racist when he observes that voting patterns differ between blacks and whites.

To acknowledge the reality of involuntary groups and the existence of group-think is not, however, to claim that all members of such a group inescapably think and act alike. For a personal example, James Sledd's father so far escaped the limitations of his peers that he had to face down a mob of Georgia rednecks in 1902, when he vigorously defended the human rights of black folks. Dr. Stotsky's suggestion that we attribute Hirsch's mistaken choices to all comparable Virginians is thus her own irrelevant invention.

As for our sentence about Colonel Blimp, it was carefully framed to prompt the inference that one cannot predict in advance what cultural information may be needed as a reader confronts a new text, so that true cultural literacy must be much less biased and much wider-ranging that Hirsch's Dictionary. The Sledds believe, in short, that what they have said of Hirsch is simple truth, without stereotyping, and that the strength of their expression is justified by the strength of their evidence (which Dr. Stotsky completely ignored), by the importance of the issues, and by the power of Hirsch and his advocates in high places.

6. Consequences

So what gets taught in Dr. Stotsky's effort to connect civic education and education in reading and writing? Our answer lies contextualized in all that we have said. Bad politics, we answer, bad reading, and bad writing. Dr. Stotsky violates her own precepts, misreads other writers in ways that favor her arguments, and consistently pushes a right-wing political agenda. We must emphasize again, however, that our primary concern is not the goodness or badness of our essay about Hirsch (which Dr. Stotsky also ignored) or of the paragraphs from our postscript to that essay (which Dr. Stotsky damnified). Instead, we repeat those three familiar but sometimes neglected propositions: first, that the politic evasion of an opponent's evidence and arguments, though commonplace, is not an academic virtue; second, that such criticism of decontextualized passages as Dr. Stotsky recommends is guaranteed to obscure issues really at stake; and third, that the ancient rhetorical tradition of blame as well as praise should not be submerged in a rhetoric of identification for immediate persuasion.

As the darkness of a social ice age descends upon us, we should not go gentle into that bad night.

7. In Damnable Iteration: Circumstances

The denunciatory rhetoric of principled resistance is neither scurrility nor mere obstructionism. Andrew and James Sledd agree with Dr. Stotsky that education for citizenship is essential. To it we have devoted substantial parts of our lives. But for what city, what society, are teachers educating citizens, and how can they best go about it?

Dr. Stotsky's fourfold categorization of responsibilities for her abstraction "the academic writer" fails because it has no place for the manifold situations, the changing circumstances, in which real academic writers live and work. It has no place for their circumstances because Dr.

Stotsky assumes a democratic society encompassing a basically healthy academy with unvarying standards for its characteristic writing. In her monograph Civic Writing in the Classroom, she maintains that her "approach to civic learning" through the application of academic writers' accustomed ways would not "pose values . . . other than those we now subscribe to as part of a democratic philosophy of government" (6 f.; emphasis added).

That seemingly innocent we must be questioned. Dr. Stotsky's general exposition, and her specific examples and analyses of good and bad writing, indicate that her we are conservative academics like Hirsch and Allan Bloom while her they are critics of the established order like Henry Giroux and the reprobate Sledds. We are among her they because we cannot take an optimistic view of "the republic." In a society always more deeply divided into haves and haven'ts and an academy which primarily serves the architects of that division, the various groups of academic writers have a variety of purposes as they write for various readers on a variety of subjects with various colleagues and opponents. By ignoring the rhetorical topic of circumstances, Dr. Stotsky reduces the functional multiplicity of academic writing to dysfunctional uniformity and guarantees misreading, especially of writers who do not share her politics.